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ABSTRACT

Described is the language experience approach to reading used in grades K-8 of a small city school system. Largely concept-centered, the program allows the students to work individually or in small groups, insuring a wide variety of learning activities. Constructed without the use of commercially prepared materials, the program encourages students to be self-motivated and self-directed. Main activities at the elementary level include diary or journal writing, reading, creative writing, creative dramatics, and arts and crafts. A sample of electives available to students at the junior high school level are American Folklore, Film and Film Making and Journalism. At all levels the development of reading and language skills are emphasized. (HS)

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Detroit, Michigan, May 10-13, 1972

PRECONVENTION INSTITUTE V

READING AND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE OPEN CLASSROOM

Tuesday, May 9, 1972 Room 2048, Cobo Hall

A CITY-WIDE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH TO READING

Dorothy Raymond, Waterville, Maine

(Presentation with simultaneous showing of 35 mm. slides of classroom scenes and samples of pupil's work on an overhead projector.)

It is always so much more satisfactory to demonstrate classroom techniques than to talk about them. Perhaps this continuous presentation of slides showing scenes from kindergarten through grade eight will help you get a feeling for the atmosphere in our classrooms as I describe the program and, with the help of an overhead projector, show samples of pupils' work. Over and over visitors comment on the ~~enthusi-~~ purposeful self-directed activities, the enthusiasm for learning and the fact that the children are so happy in school. Now let's see why that is as we observe classrooms beginning in the kindergarten.

The program throughout is largely concept centered. Because classes do not have to have the same content you will find pupils working individually and in small groups on a great variety of learning activities. A kindergarten class may be exploring magnetism as part of a larger conceptual theme: Units of matter interact. The bases of all ordinary interactions are electromagnetic, gravitational

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and nuclear force. Groups of children are sitting on the floor around piles of objects discussing and deciding which ones would be attracted by a magnet and which ones would not be. They are arranging them into two groups labeled yes and no. The teacher moves about to help them keep to the topic while being careful not to help with the decision. As each group completes this task she gives them a magnet so that they can check their work. What did they discover? The class reassembles to talk about their findings and a chart is made.

Things Magnets Attract

A nail
A thumb tack
A paper clip
A bottle cap
A pin (etc.)

All the things were made of metal.
Will magnets attract all metal?
We will find out tomorrow.

The general procedure is to involve everyone in an experience where they have an opportunity to think about what they are doing; to encourage everyone to talk by having small variable groups; and to have a larger group discussion which results in a group chart. The chart can then be read and used to develop language understandings according to individual needs, interests and abilities.

A group has gone for a walk to look for signs of spring. They return to paint. Each painter tells the teacher "all about his picture" and then decides on a name for it. The teacher writes the name and the child reads it. Later the pictures are stapled together and a book is made. Each child reads his page to the group before the

book is placed in the library corner.

In this informal flexible atmosphere, children learn to work and play together. We say that we don't teach reading in kindergarten but many do learn to read. Most children enter first grade knowing many words, the names and usual sounds of the letters, but more important they come with the ability and desire to work alone and with others in creative learning activities.

First graders move rapidly from watching the teacher write to composing, writing and then reading their own stories. The whole group participates in the same experience. This gives them something to talk about. Later, after the individual stories are written, the common experience facilitates the reading of each other's stories. During a typical morning in first grade, you would find all the pupils involved in an experience. This might be related to a specific subject area such as science, social studies, literature or mathematics or it might be chosen because of a world, national or school incident or problem. Classes have made things--puppets, collages, ice cream, apple pie, cookies, hats; they have gone on walks and bus trips, flown kites, blown bubbles, observed animals, listened to music, smelled different soaps and tasted fruits. Sometimes the experience grows out of a story or poem. During a nd after the experience everyone talks about it. Then the whole group might dictate a chart. After this the teacher would make about five suggestions; Here are three shoe boxes so three people could make dioramas; two may paint, five could work together on a mural, some of you might like to write your stories on the board, you could use

clay or make a crayon drawing at the tables, etc. Every child also writes about the experience from his viewpoint. During this activity and writing period, the teacher works with each child individually.

All beginning readers build their own sight vocabulary. Every day each child is asked to choose a work that he particularly wants to learn to read. Most children will choose one related to the group experience but they are not limited in their word choice. They must have a reason for wanting the word though because this aids in recall. Words are written on cards, kept in little boxes, and checked daily and must be recognized to be retained. Words not recognized are discarded and children readily accept this procedure when it is explained that they have no way of using the word when they cannot read it. Besides, they can always ask for the word again. In the afternoon the projects are displayed and each child reads his story to the group. Sometimes small groups take turns reading each other's stories. The teacher will use the group chart and individual stories to help pupils acquire phonics, grammar and other language understandings and as the year progresses more and more children begin reading paperback and library books.

Beginning in second grade all children write for ten minutes a day on any subject. We have called these diaries in second and third grades and journals in fourth, fifth and sixth. Most teachers find that a good time to do this is the beginning of the morning session. Pupils work independently while the teacher takes attendance and does other routine jobs. Children are encouraged to get their thoughts down

on paper. They spell the best they can and find words on charts, in dictionaries and in a booklet we have printed of commonly used words. They also ask each other. At the end of ten minutes, pupils are invited to "share" by reading what they have written. Aside from the advantages to the reader, other children get ideas to improve their own writing. Only those who volunteer are called upon to read their diaries and usually no more than five or six would read in a day. In some upper grades, the journals are shared on a voluntary basis with the teacher. The improvement in spelling, penmanship, grammar, language usage and general ability to express ideas amazes the children as well as the teachers. Since the main objective is to get children to write, individual diaries and journals are not corrected or criticized. From time to time suggestions might be made to the whole group. For example, "When you write your diaries today maybe you could have somebody saying something so that you could use quotation marks." Most children write about personal experiences but some write stories, "books" and plays. Just have one of these duplicated and you will have everyone doing it! In one second grade room this year, two girls started writing tiny diaries for their trolls. Now nearly everyone in the room has a troll or little doll or animal who not only keeps a diary but does math and creative writing, too.

Second graders begin with group charts, but since nearly everyone can read most of the children are soon choosing and reading paperback and library books. One of the advantages of an individualized program is that it is individualized for the teachers as well as the pupils so

it is difficult to describe a typical second or third grade. A pattern does evolve, though, so this is what you might see in a second or third grade. After sharing their diaries, and young children do this enthusiastically, everyone reads. Pupils are responsible for keeping their own reading records so the first thing they do is to write down the name of the book and author and the page number. We also have primary pupils react to their reading as they finish a book. They might draw a picture of the part they liked best, write about theppart they liked best, tell why they liked or didn't like the story, list the events of the story in order, write about one of the characters, etc. Special forms, stencilled on different colored paper, are provided for this but they do not have to be used. Pupils find unique ways of reacting to books. Pupils then either start reading another book or plan a project over the one they just finished. If their plans call for the involvement of other pupils, as in a puppet show or dramatization, they have to get the others to cooperate first by reading the book. During this time the teacher spends most of her time holding individual conferences. Names of children who will be having conferences are posted, usually in alphabetical order, and they are responsible for having their records in order by the time they are called. We use informal reading inventories to determine instructimnal levels, needs and goals so the teacher has specific objectives in mind as she works with each child.

Later in the day pupils can and do read but most pupils work on projects. Some teachers have a short sharing time every day when those who are ready tell about their reading. Others prefer a longer

time two or three times a week. Since the teacher is constantly working with individuals and small groups on instructional goals, she will be hearing the "sharing" for the first time along with the rest of the class. To encourage diversity, we have a list of a hundred ideas listed in three broad categories--written, dramatic and oral, and arts and crafts.

Creative writing is developed in each class every day in addition to langaage experiences, diaries and reading activities. Fourth graders write and illustrate short stories and sixth graders, alone or in small groups, write and illustrate books. One large group binds theirs by hand.

In fourth, fifth and sixth grades, pupils spend more time reading and choose more written projects. At all levels the pupils engage in self-motivated, self-directed activities so that teachers are free to teach. No basal materials or other commercially prepared kits or systems are used. Common to all classrooms are the individual conferences and informal reading inventories. The latter are administered three times a year during conference time.

All the language arts tend to be integrated more with other subjects in the middle grades. A large group of fourth graders (a team teaching situation) was divided into heterogeneous groups of five. Each group had met a "family" at a lake during the summer. The twelve different "families," pictures in envelopes, had written to say that they had decided to move here. The teachers' original plans were changed on the spot when nearly every child asked, "Why would anyone

want to live here?" It was suggested that they discuss this question with their own families and adult friends. The information they brought in was summarized and used as a basis for studying the community. The "families" presented all kinds of unusual and unexpected problems. One day a "telephone call" came. One member of the "family" would be passing through the city next week on a business trip. Would it be possible to tour the city in an hour? Preparations were made for the tour and at the appointed hour a school bus arrived and took the class on its own tour. It happened that a doughnut shop opened that day so a teacher read to the class Robert McCloskey's, Homer Price and the Doughnut Machine. Many areas of the curriculum were related to the "families" but the main objectives were in three areas: The social studies generalizations were: (1) Man's environment influences the way he lives, (2) As time passes, changes come about in man's environment, (3) Man is capable of and does change his environment to satisfy his needs. Some of the reading skills to be developed were: (1) Finding the main idea, (2) Reading for information, (3) Finding material relevant to a topic, (4) Outlining, (5) Taking notes, (6) Map reading. Some of the language skills were: (1) Discussion techniques, (2) Interviewing, (3) Writing letters, (4) Creative writing. The Some of the books read to the class by the teachers to help them appreciate the feelings of people were: Away Goes Sally by Elizabeth Coatsworth (Mammillan, 1934), Rabbit Hill by Robert Lawson and Houseboat Girl by Lois Lenski (Lippincott, 1957).

Each member of a fifth gr ade class received a card with a brief

message--Just arrived and is it hot! Guess what? They grow potatoes here too, Wish you were here to enjoy the swimming, etc. A "friend" had gone away on vacation and sent a card. The stamp had fallen off and the postmark was smudged. Where was he? By the time they narrowed it down to Hawaii they found out that there were many places in the world that were similar in some way.

Sixth graders painted the artist's conception of the universe, They wrote the poet's conception. By the time they turned to the scientist's conception they had read more and gained more knowledge than that found in a sixth grade science text. "Make something electrical," led to all manner of projects including girls reinventing the electric light, beautiful lamps, a rocket launcher capable of releasing five rockets in any combination from inside the classroom. Since everyone had to know why his project worked every one had to read. All were described in writing in the acceptable scientific form and a book was written,"Making Household Electrical Repairs."

What happens in junior high? We have about 700 pupils in grades seven and eight in non-graded heterogeneous language arts classes meeting two hours a day. Pupils choose four interest areas a year from course descriptions written by the teachers. Every course includes individualized reading, spelling, writing, speaking and independent and group activities and projects. Obviously there would be more emphasis on writing in creative writing than in radio and television. There is considerable carry over from one to another--those who have had creative drama will do a better job acting our commericals for television than

those who haven't. The offerings vary from year to year. Some choices this year besides the ones already mentioned are: Short Stories, American Folklore and Legends, Sports, Mysteries, Films and Film Making, Journalism, Man and His World, and Literature Spectrum. The school owns a bus so there are many field trips. At the end of eight weeks, each person has produced or contributed an ourstanding project such as a newspaper, film, book, play, video tape and radio script.

This has been a brief description of the language experience approach as used in a small city with an elementary school population of under 3000.

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